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ABSTRACT

Interview data on the learning experiences and techniques of 90 Swedish teenagers and adults were further analyzed to explore changes in views on learning reported by the subjects themselves, and differences between subjects with respect to age (range 15-73) and formal education (range 6-17 years). Some subjects equated knowledge with discrete units of information, and learning with transfer of facts into the head. Others introduced various distinctions as they described their conceptions of learning, as well as their methods of study; the phenomenon of learning became an object of reflection (thematized). This group could distinguish between learning for life versus learning in school, and between rote learning versus understanding; furthermore, they were also aware of the influence of the context of learning. Since this was not a longitudinal study, it was difficult to draw conclusions about developmental changes. It was hypothesized that extensive experience leads to thematization, and that thematization improves learning performance. (CP)

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study has been to explore possible developmental differences in conceptions of learning amongst a group of subjects with very different learning experiences. The data consists of interviews with 90 subjects concerning their approach to learning. The subjects were selected according to two criteria: age (which ranged from 15 years 7 months up to 73 years 3 months) and level of formal education (with a minimum of 6 years and a maximum of 16/17 years).

Analysis of the interviews revealed that there are distinctive differences between subjects in terms of their subjective conceptions of learning (the nature of these conceptions has been described in a previous study in this series). In the present article, the focus is on describing what seems to be an important developmental process: for some subjects the phenomenon of learning has become thematized, i.e. it has been made an object of reflection, while for others it represents an activity the nature of which is taken for granted.

# INTRODUCTION

In general, it seems logical to assume that if you practice something, you become better at it. This statement would probably be considered by most people to hold true with regard to most areas of human life and human performance, and there seems to be no a priori reason for excluding the phenomenon of learning. However, in addressing this question, as will be done here, one has to be aware of the ambiquity of the seemingly very simple statement "becoming better at learning". In other words, one has to agree upon some criteria as to when a person or a group of persons has become better at learning or, more generally, one has to come to an agreement on how to operationalize differences in learning performance.

If one were to ask a number of people, educational researchers as well as laymen, to set up an experiment which would decide who of a given group of persons is the best learner, the chances are probably quite large that this experiment would be designed to tell us who could learn most "units of information" in a given period of time or who could learn a given amount of material most quickly. What I am trying to say is that my guess is that to most people the statement "being better at learning" has a purely quantitative meaning and consequently the decision as to who of a number of persons is the best learner is seen as a question of "how much" and/or "how fast". Similarly, should one agree to the initial statement about the relationship betwen practice and performance within this perspective on learning, it would imply that practice in one way or another would imply an increase in the capacity to absorb information.

This perspective on learning which seems natural and self-evident to many is, however, only a perspective, or rather, <u>one</u> perspective. It is a perspective which is taken for granted in most studies on learning, and empirical research which is carried out within this mainstream frame-work never has to include any justification of e.g. why differences between people with respect to learning are described the way they are, i.e. in terms of "more" or "less". Nevertheless, one could argue that there are alternative ways of conceptualizing the phenomenon of learning leading to different approaches in em-

pirical research. In the following, an attempt will be made to give a brief glimpse of some empirical results related to the issue of how experience of learning might bring about changes, perhaps even improvments, in a person's approach to learning. These results emerge from research aimed at describing this phenomenon in its natural context, i.e. in an educational environment.

An alternative starting point for the study of learning would be to consider a person's approach to learning, and consequently also to a large extent the degree of success he has in this respect, as a consequence of, among other things, his beliefs about what learning is all about. Thus, one could argue that the fact that people approach learning in different ways could be understood as a reflection of the fact that they have different beliefs or conceptions of learning. A description of such significant differences in people's conceptions of learning was given in a previous article in this series (Säljö 1979a).

Now, the question which interests us here is that if the phenomenon of learning is studied with this as a starting-point, i.e. in an experiential perspective, how could extensive experiences of learning be assumed to change people's conceptions of this phenomenon? To answer this question it would, of course, be most feasible to carry out a longitudinal study of different learning careers. However, since the present study is of a cross-sectional design (a design which is quite unsuitable for studying development, cf Marton and Säljö 1976) no attempt will be made to make any definite statements about developmental changes. Rather, what will be focused on is a brief description of what seems to be significant differences between experienced and inexperienced learners in their conception of learning.

## PROCEDURE

During an individual interview within the framework of a rather lengthy learning experiment, a number of subjects were asked a series of questions on various aspects of the phenomenon of learning. Some of these questions concerned the subject's own learning activities, both his study methods (e.g. How do you usually go about learning?) as well as his conception of what learning is all about (e.g. What do you actually mean by learning?). Other questions concerned more general aspects of the phenomenon of learning, such as his ideas about why some are better at learning than others etc.

The interview formed the introductory part of the whole experiment and, since the observations to be reported on here emanate only from this initial phase, there is no need for going into detail about the latter parts of the experimental session (for a complete description of the experiment, see Marton and Säljö 1978 and Säljö 1978a).

The analysis of data was carried out on the transcripts of the interviews. To be quite explicit it should be pointed out that two kinds of data, or rather information sources, form the background of the findings described below. The first kind of data is the descriptions of change in their views on learning given by the subjects themselves (e.g. statements of the kind "I used to go about learning in this way, but I found out that if you do it the other way, it works much better"). The other kind of data which has been of interest is the descriptions given by very inexperienced learners (e.g. people with six years of school 20-25 years ago and with no intermediate studying) as compared to the descriptions given by very experienced learners (e.g. university graduates with 16 or 17 years of uninterrupted schooling). Thus, in contrasting such descriptions (although, of course, only in a few cases as extreme as the examples used here) we have attempted to explore the nature of possible changes in conception of or perspective on learning.

## SUBJECTS

Since a major focus of interest in the research project which this study is a part of has been on studying possible differences between people with respect to their ideas and beliefs about learning, the selection of subjects was carried out so as to achieve as great a degree of heterogeneity as possible. In the selection procedure, two criteria were used: age and level of formal education. The variations between subjects as regards both of these criteria are considerable. With respect to age, the range is from 15 years and 7 months up to 73 years and 3 months, and with respect to level of formal education, the minimum was 6 years and the maximum 16/17 years (for a more detailed description of the subjects, see Säljö 1979a).

## RESULTS

In the accounts given by the subjects concerning their conception of learning and also concerning their methods of study, etc, there are, of course, all sorts of differences and similarities. However, besides these differences and similarities, which in many cases are quite expected, there is a very striking and, in my belief, from a pedagogical point of view, very interesting difference between groups of subjects with respect to the perspective they put on learning. In essence, what will be reported here is that in our interviews it is obvious that for some subjects the phenomenon of learning in itself has become an object of reflection, while for others this is not the case. In saying this, it is being claimed that for some, learning is something which can be explicitly talked about and discussed and it can be the object of conscious planning and analysis. In learning thesepersons realize that there are, for instance, alternative strategies or approaches, which may be useful or suitable in various situations depending on e.g. time available, interest, demands of teachers and anticipated tests etc, etc. To use a somewhat different terminology, this difference between groups which emerges in our material can be described by saying that for some learning has become thematized, while for a considerable proportion of the subjects included in this study this is not the case. In the following,

an attempt will be made to briefly a) indicate a few significant aspects of this thematization of learning and b) to comment on the significance of this phenomenon.

## Learning becomes thematic

What, then, is implied by saying that learning becomes thematic? Perhaps the easiest and least time- and space-consuming way to do this is to contrast the extremes in this respect found in the present material. Thus, we can think of two extreme perspectives which can be characterized in the following way. The most significant feature of one of these perspectives is that the nature of learning is taken for granted. In this "taken-for-granted-perspetive", learning is described in very absolute terms as an essentially reproductive memorizing activity where the task of the learner is perceived of as that of "getting all the facts into your head". Those who are familiar with Perry's (1970) work will no doubt recognize this description as being rather close to his earlier stages (cf Säljö 1978a). Anyway, it seems as if in this "taken-for-granted-perspective" learning and knowledge are perceived in rather congruent terms. Thus, subjects tend to equate knowledge with what you might call "discrete units of information" or simply "facts" and learning consequently is the transfer of these discrete units into the head of the learner. The point is, however, that the whole business of learning is very simple and the only variations which are introduced concern such as how much time one devotes to learning, whether one underlines or not etc.

In contrast to what has been said so far, it is obvious from our data that at certain points in their careers as learners the more experienced learners in most cases started to reflect on learning as such or, in other words, this phenomenon has become thematic. This manifests itself in the fact that subjects start to introduce various qualifications and distinctions as they describe their conceptions of learning as well as their methods of study. Thus, the general point of view becomes one where "learning can be more than one thing" and "it all depends, really".

In the present data, three such main distinctions emerge. In other words, there are three distinctions which are introduced by subjects when describing and talking about the phenomenon of learning during the course of the interview which illustrate that certain aspects of learning and the learning process have become thematic. Of course not all of these subjects introduce all three distinctions, rather each individual can include one or more. However, since we are not interested in classifying individuals, but rather in exploring the nature of possible changes in conceptions of learning, we need not go into details about this particular problem here. Anyway, the three main distinctions introduced by subjects in describing the phenomenon of learning can be briefly summarized as follows:

1. The first of these distinctions concern subjects reporting themselves as becoming aware of the influence of the context of learning on what you should learn and how you should set about it. Thus, subjects report that at some time or another they started to try to adapt their learning to various kinds of demands (e.g. teachers, tests etc). This is of course the perspective described by, for instance, Snyder (1971) and Miller and Parlett (1974) and, to follow the terminology suggested by the last two researchers, this distinction implies that subjects somehow become "cue-conscious", i.e. they become aware of the implicit rules governing learning in a school context. Whether or not subjects decide to adapt their learning to these rules is a different problem. The main thing is, however, that the experienced learner is very clearly aware of such demands.

2. The two remaining distinctions are more closely linked to the activity of learning as such. The first of these refers to a distinction between learning "for life" versus learning in school. Quite a large proportion of the subjects make this distinction, the essential nature of which seems to be that learning in school is perceived of as an activity which to a too large an extent has become stereotyped and routinized, guided only by the needs and principles of schools themselves. Learning in school is thus by many held to be a particular activity whose prime feature is artificiality in the sense that it is not perceived of as being organically related to anything out-

side the school situation itself. Many of the subjects who analyse learning in school on the basis of this distinction are consequently very negative and critical. However, for our present purposes it may suffice to say that the discovery of this problematic nature of learning in educational contexts seem to many to serve as a step through which learning becomes thematized.

3. Perhpas the most interesting distinction in the present data concerns the fact that a certain points subjects report themselves as having started to think about the nature of what is learned or, using the terminology of Colaizzi (1973), the nature of the learned content. This distinction is introduced by the subjects themselves as that between either learning and real learning or, even more commonly, as that between learning and understanding. Real learning or understanding is, in this case contrasted with rote learning and its main feature is considered to be that it in some way involves the abstraction of meaning (cf Colaizzi 1973) from learning materials rather than a mere reproduction of them. In a sense, the nature of what is learned is perceived as being more complex and of a more holistic nature; it is a perspective, a point of view, an interpretation, a principle etc, rather than the plain "facts" which subjects previously report themselves as having perceived as constituting what is to be learned. These facts are now seen instead as subordinated to what should really be learned, i.e. the general meaning.

Anyway, the main point of this brief account has been to indicate the kinds of distinctions made by some but not all subjects in talking about learning. Now, the suggestion I would like to make here is that these kinds of results tell us something about how a person's ideas and beliefs about learning change as a function of his experiences. Learning becomes thematic and the student becomes more aware of himself as a learner, of the context of learning and its demands and of the long and short-term results of learning.

## DISCUSSION

The starting point for this study has been an interest in the experiential side of learning. More specifically, we have attempted to give a brief description of how people's conceptions of learning might develop, from what has been called a "taken-for-granted-perspective" to a thematic conception involving an awareness of various aspects of the phenomenon of learning and its contexts. In a previous article in this series (Säljö 1979a), it was argued that there are significant differences between people with respect to conceptions of learning. In that particular study, which was based on the same empirical material as the present one (although the data base in that case was only one specific and very central question), five categories denoting different conceptions of learning were described. No doubt, the developmental changes pointed to here can be seen as compatible to the variations in conceptions of learning in the sense that the "taken-for-granted-perspective" seems to correspond to the earlier categories (e.g. "Learning as memorizing") while the latter (e.g. "Learning as abstraction of meaning") clearly can be seen as involving the kinds of distinctions described in this study. Also, in both these studies it has been found that it seems as if at some stage people begin to make a distinction between learning in a school-context and learning outside this control. Although the design of the experiment which forms the background of both of these articles makes it very difficult to make any statements about developmental changes, one might hypothesize that the categories described in the previous study also can be thought of as steps which some individuals climb in their learning careers. However, to be able to make meaningful statements about this we do, of course, need studies with alternative designs involving longitudinal comparisons of individual subjects.

Now, if we claim that extensive experience of learning (i.e. the kind of learning studied here) may lead to a thematization, does this have anything to do with learning performance? Of course, this is not something which can be answered here. However, a personal guess by the author would be that this is indeed the case in the sense that when people become aware of their own learning in different respects, they will be better equipped to deal with various sorts

of difficulties, such as e.g. the ones described by Marton and Säljö (1979) in a subsequent article in this series. They may not become better learners within the context of the psychological laboratory with its artificial and nonsense learning matierals, but there are good reasons for thinking that they will become better at handling ordinary learning and reading problems of the kinds encountered in every-day life, or at least, in every-day studies. In other words, it is argued that if the kind of learning we are interested in involves the understanding of principles and arguemnts, the handling of more or less complex written materials (cf the article by Marton and Säljö which exemplifies this), the selection of what are the important parts or arguments of a book, etc, then one could assume that the kind of changes which have been pointed to here become important, since these changes imply a redefinition on the parts of the subjects from a conception of learning which in turn implies a very memorizing approach to a conception where learning is conceived of as involving an active search for ideas, principles and arguments which can be used e.g. in understanding reality.

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